



## Causal superseding



Jonathan F. Kominsky<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jonathan Phillips<sup>a</sup>, Tobias Gerstenberg<sup>b</sup>, David Lagnado<sup>c</sup>,  
Joshua Knobe<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Yale University, United States

<sup>b</sup> Massachusetts Institute of Technology, United States

<sup>c</sup> University College London, United Kingdom

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### ABSTRACT

When agents violate norms, they are typically judged to be more of a cause of resulting outcomes. In this paper, we suggest that norm violations also affect the causality attributed to other agents, a phenomenon we refer to as “causal superseding.” We propose and test a counterfactual reasoning model of this phenomenon in four experiments. Experiments 1 and 2 provide an initial demonstration of the causal superseding effect and distinguish it from previously studied effects. Experiment 3 shows that this causal superseding effect is dependent on a particular event structure, following a prediction of our counterfactual model. Experiment 4 demonstrates that causal superseding can occur with violations of non-moral norms. We propose a model of the superseding effect based on the idea of counterfactual sufficiency.

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## 1. Introduction

In the 1870 case of *Carter v. Towne*, the court faced an intriguing causal question. The defendant sold gunpowder to a child. The child’s mother and aunt hid the gunpowder, but in a location that they knew the child could find and access. The child found the gunpowder and was injured. The court judged that the defendant could not be considered to be the cause of the child’s injuries, because of the negligence of the mother and aunt (Hart & Honoré, 1985, pp. 281–282).

This case leaves us with an interesting puzzle about causal reasoning. The question before the court was not whether the mother and aunt caused the outcome; it was whether the defendant caused the outcome. Yet the court determined that the fact that the actions of the

mother and aunt were negligent had some effect on the causal relationship between the defendant’s actions and the outcome. This suggests a broader phenomenon of causal reasoning: the extent to which one agent is perceived to have caused an outcome may be affected not only by his or her own actions, but also by the normative status of other people’s actions. We refer to this as ‘causal superseding’.

It is well-established that judgments of norm violations, such as moral norm violations, can affect causal judgments. An agent who acts in a way that is judged to be morally wrong is seen as more causal than an agent whose actions conform with moral norms (e.g., Alicke, 1992). Recent work has suggested that, rather than being about morality specifically, these effects are rooted in the normality of an agent’s actions, i.e., how much they diverge from prescriptive or statistical norms (Halpern & Hitchcock, 2014; Hitchcock & Knobe, 2009; but see Alicke, Rose, & Bloom, 2011). However, most of the work to date has focused on how the normality of an agent’s actions affects that agent’s own causality, not anyone else’s. The present experiments aim to demonstrate and

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Yale University, Box 208205, New Haven, CT 06520-8205, United States. Tel./fax: +1 (203) 432 6451.

E-mail address: [jonathan.kominsky@yale.edu](mailto:jonathan.kominsky@yale.edu) (J.F. Kominsky).

explore the causal superseding effect suggested by the intriguing case of *Carter v. Towne*.

### 1.1. Describing causal superseding

Before discussing how the phenomenon of causal superseding may provide helpful insight into causal reasoning more generally, it is worth considering how causal superseding is related to previous research. In general, there has been relatively little research suggesting that causal judgments about one agent are affected by aspects of some other independent agent. That the actions of one person can have an influence on causal judgments about another person has been demonstrated in the relatively under-discussed research on causal chains where multiple agents collectively contribute to the occurrence of some harm (Fincham & Roberts, 1985; Fincham & Shultz, 1981; Gerstenberg & Lagnado, 2012; Lagnado & Channon, 2008; McClure, Hilton, & Sutton, 2007; Spellman, 1997; Wells & Gavanski, 1989). Among other findings, these studies report a pattern whereby the first agent in the causal chain was judged to be less of a cause of the harm that eventually occurred when the second (more proximal) agent acted *voluntarily*, rather than *involuntarily*. The explanation offered for this effect was that the voluntariness of the proximal agent's action 'broke' the perceived causal chain between the first agent and the outcome. This effect differs from the superseding effect suggested by *Carter v. Towne*. In that case, it was not the voluntariness of the aunt and mother's actions, but the *negligence* of their actions that prevented the defendant from being a cause of the child's injuries. Another closely related line of work investigated the role of 'mutability' (the ease with which the cause can be imagined to have been different) and 'propensity' (the likelihood that the effect would occur if the cause was present) in causal judgments (McGill & Tenbrunsel, 2000). This study found that one causal factor is seen as weaker when another causal factor is more mutable, though only when the mutable cause is also very likely to bring about the outcome.

Here, we specifically focus on the role of norm violations and consider their impact on causal judgments across a number of different causal structures. However, even focusing on norm violations, we also wish to acknowledge two alternative explanations for the phenomenon we investigate, one informed by intuition and the other based on existing and well-supported motivational theories.

First, one might intuitively think that "there is only so much causality to go around," and it is already known that when an agent does something that is morally wrong or otherwise in violation of some norm, that agent's causality is increased (Alicke, 1992; Hitchcock & Knobe, 2009). Then, if the norm-violation of one agent's action increases that agent's causality, it follows under this intuition that some other factor's causality will have to be reduced. Though this explanation might seem compelling at first, there is already empirical evidence that causal responsibility is not generally a zero-sum judgment (Kominsky, Phillips, Gerstenberg, Lagnado, & Knobe, 2014; Lagnado, Gerstenberg, & Zultan, 2013; Teigen & Brun, 2011). For example, when an outcome was brought about by a

collection of causes that were each individually necessary for its coming about, then each cause was judged as fully responsible (Lagnado et al., 2013; Zultan, Gerstenberg, & Lagnado, 2012). Thus, while perhaps intuitively attractive, we do not believe this explanation can account for causal superseding.

Second, it is already known that people's causal judgments can be impacted by motivational factors. For example, a series of studies have found that people's judgments are often distorted by "blame validation" (Alicke, 1992, 2000; Alicke, Buckingham, Zell, & Davis, 2008; Lagnado & Channon, 2008): A motivational bias to assign causality to people who are blameworthy, with only minimal regard for their actual causal status. Subsequent work has extended this account to include "excuse validation" (Turri & Blouw, 2014): The motivation *not* to assign causality to individuals whom we do *not* feel are blameworthy. For example, if a driver is speeding because of an accelerator malfunction and gets into a lethal accident, we might be disinclined to regard the driver as a cause of the accident because her actions are blameless. This basic idea could then be used to explain causal superseding. If one agent does something morally wrong and is therefore seen as the one who is to blame for the outcome, people could be motivated to exculpate all other agents from blame, and may accordingly reduce the extent to which they are seen as causing the outcome.

The latter explanations draw on claims that have already received extensive support in the existing empirical literature, and we do not mean to call these empirical claims into question here. Instead, we simply provide experimental evidence for causal superseding that requires an importantly different kind of explanation. Thus, the present research goes beyond what has been demonstrated in previous work, but is not incompatible with it.

### 1.2. A counterfactual account of causal superseding

We propose an account of the superseding effect based on counterfactual reasoning. According to this account, the effects of valence on causal judgments are mediated by counterfactual reasoning. This account follows two key claims: First, counterfactual reasoning affects causal judgment; second, moral valence affects counterfactual reasoning. We will explore each of these claims in turn.

#### 1.2.1. Counterfactual reasoning and causal judgment

There are many accounts of how counterfactual reasoning interacts with causal judgment (e.g., Gerstenberg, Goodman, Lagnado, & Tenenbaum, 2014; Lewis, 1973; Petrocelli, Percy, Sherman, & Tormala, 2011; but see Mandel, 2003). We focus here on an aspect of the relationship between counterfactuals and causation that has been referred to as sensitivity (or robustness) of causation (Hitchcock, 2012; Knobe & Szabó, 2013; Lombrozo, 2010; Woodward, 2006).

Existing work on counterfactual theories of causation suggests that people regard an event as a cause of the outcome when it satisfies two counterfactual conditions, 'necessity' and 'sufficiency' (e.g., Pearl, 1999; Woodward, 2006). Take the causal relationship "A caused B". Roughly

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